



Patricia

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PATRICIA

Bells and pine trees, cut from green and red construction paper, were piled neatly on the dining room table. All done. Just the glitter was left for the trim. Last year she had made a mistake letting the smaller ones do it. After cleaning their fingers and elbows of glue, picking the tiny specks of silver from their hair and faces, she had to do the decorations over anyway. This time she would hand out the bells and trees for the wrapping paper and monitor each dot of glue herself. Although the pot holders, pin cushions, the painted boxes and paper doilies were like all the Christmas presents she supervised, this was, for her, the best time of the year. [tk] The older ones rehearsed with Kate. The middle ones memorized their speeches. And the whole town helped or meddled: men repaired the platform, strung rope for sheet curtains and Christmas lights; the women made cookies, punch, taffy and wrapped the peppermint sticks with big red bows. The church programs were more elaborate but the school program,

featuring a pageant, involved everybody.

Unlike in other years, these December days were warm and windy; the sky behaving like a showgirl: exchanging its pale, melancholy mornings to sport long ribbons of primary colors in the evening. A mineral scent was in the air, sweeping down from some Genesis time when volcanos stirred and lava cooled quickly under relentless wind. Wind that scoured cold stone then sculpted it and, finally, crumbled it to the bits rockhounds loved. The same wind that once lifted streams of Cheyenne/Arapaho hair also parted clumps of it from the shoulders of bison telling both when the other was near.

She had noticed the mineral smell all day and now, finished with grading papers and making decorations, she checked the showgirl sky for a repeat performance. But it was over. Just some lilac shapes running after a day-glo sun.

Her father had gone to bed early, exhausted from the monologue he had delivered at the supper table about the gas station he was planning. Eagle Oil was encouraging him--no use to talk to the big oil companies. Deek and Steward were interested in approving the loan, selling him the property. The only question was where. Across from Anna's store? Good spot, but Holy Redeemer might not think so.

North, then? Next to Sargeant's Feed and Seed? There would be plenty of customers--nobody would have to travel ninety miles for gasoline, or keep tanks of it where they lived. The roads? Something might be done to the two dirt ones that extended south and north of Ruby's paved road to the county's route 18. With the franchise, the county might tarmac them both. It would be a problem though, trying to get local people to agree to petition for it--the old ones would put up a fight. They liked being off the county road, accessible only to the lost and the knowledgeable. "But think of it, Patsy, just think of it. I could fix cars, engines; sell tires, batteries, fan belts. Soda pop too. Something Anna don't stock. No point in getting her riled up."

Patricia nodded. A very good idea, she thought, like all of his ideas. His veterinary practice (illegal, he had no license, but who knew or cared enough to drive a hundred miles to help Wisdom Poole yank on a foal stuck in its mother?); his butcher business (bring him the slaughtered steer--he'd skin, butcher, carve and refrigerate it for you); and of course the ambulance/ mortuary business. Because he wanted to be, studied to be, a doctor most of his enterprises had to do with operating on the sick or dead. The gas station idea was the

first non-surgical proposal she could remember (though his eyes did fire when he spoke of taking apart engines). She wished he had been a doctor, had been accepted in a medical school. Chances are her mother would be alive today. Maybe not. Maybe he would have been away at Meharry instead of the mortuary school when Delia died.

Pat climbed the stairs to her bedroom and decided to while away the rest of the evening on her history project. Rather what used to be a history project but was nothing of the sort now. It began as a gift to Ruby--a collection of family trees; the geneologies of each of the fifteen families. Upside down trees, the trunks sticking in the air, the branches sloping down. When the trees were completed she had begun to supplement the branches of who begat whom with notes: what work they did, for example, where they lived, to what church they belonged. Some of the nicer touches ("Was Missy Rivers, wife of Thomas Blackhorse, born near the Mississippi River? Her names seems to suggest...") she had gotten from her students' autobiographical compositions. Not anymore. Some parents complained about their children being asked to gossip, to divulge what could be private information, secrets, even. After that most of her notes came from talking to people, asking to see bibles and

church records. But she didn't want or need any further research. The trees still required occasional alterations--births, marriages, deaths--but her interest in the supplementary notes increased as the notes did and she gave up all pretense to objective comment. It had reached the point where the small m period was a joke, a dream, a violation of law that had her biting her thumbnail in disgust and fury. Who were these women who, like her mother, had only single names? Celeste, Olive, Sorrow, Iulin, Pansy. Who were these women with generic, untraceable last names? Brown, Smith, Rivers, Stone, Franklin. Women whose identity rested on the men they married--if marriage applied: a Morgan, a Flood, a Blackhorse, a Poole, a Fleetwood. Dovey had let her have the Morgan Bible for weeks, but it was the twenty minutes she spent looking at the Blackhorse Bible that convinced her that a new kind of tree species would be needed to go further, to record accurately the relationships among the fifteen families of Ruby and their ancestors in Haven, and, further back, in Louisiana.

A voluntary act to fill idle hours had become labor full of frustration and bad feelings. There were nine large intact families who made the original journey, who were cast away in the Oklahoma

and went on to found Haven. Their names were legend: Blackhorse, Morgan, Poole, Fleetwood, Sands, Best, Cato, Flood, DuPres. With their siblings, wives and children they were 79 or 81 in all (depending on whether the two stolen children were counted). Along with them came family fragments: a sister and a brother, four cousins, a river of aunts and great aunts shepherding the children of their dead sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews. Stories about these fragments, which made up some fifty more, surfaced in the compositions of Pat's students, the gossip and recollections at picnics, funerals and women-talk over chores. Bits of tales, as incomplete as the families, rendered them recognizable by the absences that hovered near them; the spaces that sat with them at the campfire, the mementoes--a ring, a brooch--clamped in their fists while they slept; and in the descriptions of the clothes they wore: too big shoes that belonged to a brother; the shawl of a grandmother, the split brim hat of a younger sister. Then there were the orphaned, males and females, ages twelve to sixteen, who spotted the travelers and asked to join, and two toddlers they had just snatched up because the circumstances in which they were found forced them to. Another eight. So about one hundred and fifty-eight total.

At their arrival in tk, Drum Blackhorse, Rector Morgan and his brothers, Pryor and Shepherd, went first, while the others waited with Zachariah who was to lame by then to stand straight in front of unknown men of whom he expected understanding. The infirmity that forced him to stay behind and let his sons speak proved to be a moment of grace because he missed witnessing the actual Disallowing; and missed hearing unbelievable words formed in the mouths of men to other men, men like them in all ways but one. Afterwards the people were no longer nine families and some more. They became a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them. Their horror of whites was total but abstract. They saved the purity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding to articulate. First by excluding them; then by offering them staples to exist in that very exclusion. Pat knew that everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many. But the ramifications of those ramifications were another story.

She looked out of the window as she prepared another entry. The wind soughed trying to dislodge sequins from the black crepe sky.

Arnette and K.D., married last July, were expecting a child. Or so said Lone DuPres who ought to know. Lone was one of the stolen babies. Fairy duPres saw her sitting outside the door of a sod house in a little dirty shift. Whimpering. They were on their way to what would become Haven and this was one of the many painful sights they came across. Fairy and Missy Rivers went to investigate. Inside was the dead mother and not a piece of bread in sight. Missy sighed and shook her head; Fairy said "God damn it, 'scuse me. Lord." and picked the baby up. When they told the others what they'd found, seven men silently got up and reached for their shovels: Drum Blackhorse, Rector Morgan, Thomas and Peter Blackhorse, Able Flood, Brood Poole, Sr. and Nathan DuPres. While they dug, Fairy fed the baby. Praise Compton tore her underskirt to wrap around it. Fulton Best fashioned a sturdy cross. Zachariah, held up by two of his sons, delivered a burial prayer. His daughters, Loving, Ella and Selanie gathered flowers for the grave. Bitty Cato and fairy argued over the name, and Fairy won. She named the baby Lone because that's how they found her and taught her everything she knew about midwifery. And Lone she still was for she never married and when Faiory died she slipped right in and took care of the birthing for everybody except

now Arnette was insisitng on going to the hospital in Demby to have it. It cut Lone to the quick, but she knew the Fleetwoods hadn't given up on thinking she was partly responsible for Sweetie and Jeff's children, in spite of the fact that she had delivered thirty-two healthy babies to doing-just-fine mothers since the last broken Fleetwood baby was delivered. So she said nothing except that Arnette's time would be March of '75.

Pat located the Morgan file and went to the limb that, so far, contained one line:

Cato Smith (aka K.D. [as in Kentucky Derby]) m. Arnette
Fleetwood

There wasn't much space beneath but they probably wouldn't need more. If it lived, the baby they were expecting would certainly be an only child. Arnette's mother had only two children, one of whom had fathered only defectives. In addition these later Morgans were not as prolific as the earlier ones. They were unlike Zechariah Morgan (aka Big Papa nee Coffee) m. Mindy Flood [note: Anna Flood's great aunt] who had nine children survive. Pat ran her finger over

their names: Pryor Morgan, Rector Morgan, Shepherd Morgan, Ella Morgan, Loving Morgan, Selanie Morgan, Governor Morgan, Queen Morgan and Scout Morgan. One of her earlier notes read: "It took seven births for them to get around to giving a female child an administrative, authoritative sounding name, and I bet they called her 'Queenie.' " Another comment, threading out from Zechariah's name, was "He must have named himself. Coffee was his birth name--a misspelling of Kofi, surely. And since no Louisiana Morgans or any of the Haven people had worked for any whites named Morgan, he must have chosen his last name as well as his first from something or someplace he liked. Zacharias, father of John the Baptist? or the Zechariah who had visions? The one who saw scrolls of curses and women in baskets; the one who saw Joshua's filthy clothes changed into rich ones; who saw the result of disobedience. The punishment for not showing mercy or compassion was a scattering among all nations, and land once pleasant made desolate. All of that would fit for Zechariah Morgan: the curse, the women stuffed into a basket with a lid of lead and hidden away in a house, but especially the scattering. The scattering would have frightened him. The break up of the group or tribe or consortium of families or, in Coffee's case, the

splitting up of a contingent of families who had lived with or near each other since before Bunker Hill. He would not have trouble imagining the terror of having everybody he knew thrown apart, thrown into different places in a foreign land and becoming alien to each other. He would be frightened of not knowing a jawline that signified one family, a cast of eye or a walk that identified another. Of not being able to see yourself duplicated in a third or fourth generation grandchild. Of not knowing where the generations before him were buried or how to get in touch with them if you didn't know. That would be the Zechariah Coffee would choose for himself. That would have appealed to him if he had heard some mighty preacher tell that story of Joshua crowned. He would not name himself after Joshua, the king, but after the witness to whom God and angels spoke on a regular basis about things Coffee knew something about."

When she asked Steward where his grandfather got his name, either of them--"Zachariah" or "Morgan"--he'd grunted and said he thought it was "Moyne" originally, not Morgan. Or "Le Moyne" or something but "We called him Big Papa. Called my daddy Big Daddy" as though that ended it. Insulted-like, because he himself wasn't a papa or a daddy, big or otherwise. Because the Morgan line was

slackening. One of Zechariah's (Big Papa's) sons, named Rector, had seven children with his wife, Beck, but only four survived: Elder, the twins Deacon and Steward, and K.D.'s mother, Ruby. Elder died leaving his wife Susannah (Smith) Morgan with six children--all of whom moved from Haven to northern states. Zechariah would hate that. Moving would be "scattering" to him. And sure enough, from then on the fertility shrivelled even while the bounty multiplied. The more money, the fewer children; the fewer children, the more money to give the fewer children. Assuming you amassed enough of it, which was why the richest ones--Deek and Steward--were so keen on the issue of K.D.'s marriage. Or so Pat supposed.

All of them, however, each and every one of the intact nine families had the little mark she had chosen to put after their names. 8-R. An abbreviation for eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines. Those with blue black skin, tall and graceful, whose wide innocent eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them. Descendents of those who had been in Louisiana when it was French, when it was Spanish, when it was French again, when it was sold as territory to Jefferson and when it became a state in 1812. Who spoke a patois part spanish, part French,

part English and all their own. Descendents of those who, after the Civil War, had defied or hid from whites who were doing all they could to force them to stay and work as sharecroppers in Louisiana. Descendents of those who had walked to the 'Run.' Walked, like pilgrims to Mecca, from Louisiana to Oklahoma in 1890 and got to the place described in advertisements carefully folded into their shoes or creased into the brims of their hats only to be shooed away.

Pat was convinced that when the next generation of 8-rock males did scatter, just as Zachariah feared--into the army--it could have been over and done with. Should have been over and done with. The rejection of the pilgrims, the Disallowing, was a burn whose scar tissue was numb by 1949, wasn't it? Oh, no. Those that survived that particular war came right back home, saw what had become of Haven, heard about the missing testicles of other ex-colored soldiers; about medals being torn off by gangs of rednecks and Sons of the Confederacy--and recognized Disallowing, Part Two. It would have been like watching a parade banner that said WAR WEARY SOLDIERS! UNWELCOME HOME! So they did it again. And just as the original wayfarers never sought another colored townsite after being cold-shouldered at the first, this generation joined no organization, fought

no civil battle. They consolidated the 8-rock blood and, haughty as ever, moved further west. The New Fathers: Deacon Morgan, Steward Morgan, William Cato, Ace Flood, Aaron Poole, Senior Pulliam, Nathan DuPres, Moss DuPres, Arnold Fleetwood, Ossie Beauchamp, Harper Jury, Sargeant Person, John Seawright, Edwards Sands and her father, Roger Best, who was the first to violate the blood rule. The one nobody admitted existed. The one established when the Louisiana pilgrims noticed and remembered that the Disallowing came from fair-skinned colored men. Blue-eyed, gray-eyed yellowmen in good suits. They were kind, though, as the story went. Gave them food and blankets; took up a collection for them, but were unmoving in their refusal to let the 8-rocks stay longer than a night's rest. The story went that Zechariah Morgan and Drum Blackhorse forbade the women to eat the food. That August Cato left the blankets in the tent with the offering of three dollars and nine cents neatly stacked on top. But Soane said her grandmother, Celeste Blackhorse, sneaked back and got the food secretly passing it to her sister Sally Blackhorse, to Bitty Cato, and Praise Compton to distribute to the children.

So the rule was set and lived a solid forever life because it was never spoken, except for the hint in words Zechariah forged for the

Oven. More than a rule. A curse: "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" in which the You (understood) nominative case was not a command to the believers, the pilgrims looking for Paradise, but a threat to those who had stood in the way. It must have taken him months to think up those words--just so--to have multiple meanings; to appear stern urging obedience to God, but neutral, not identifying the subject of the sentence nor specifying what the Furrow might cause to happen. So the teen-agers Misner organized who wanted to change it to "We Are the Furrow of His Brow" were more insightful than they knew. Look what they did to Menus, forcing him to give back or return the woman he brought home to marry. The pretty sandy-haired girl from Virginia. Menus hadn't been sober since. And though they attributed his weekend drunks to his Vietnam memories, and although they laughed with him as he cut their hair, Pat knew how in its desperate state when she saw it. She believed she had seen it in her father's eyes, poorly veiled by his business ventures.

Before she put away the K.D. pages, Pat scribbled a vertical note up the margin: "Somebody beat up Arnette. The frequent women as folks say? Or, quiet as its kept, K.D.?" Then she picked up the file for Best, Roger. On the back of the page labeled:

Roger Best m. Delia

she wrote: "Daddy, they don't hate us because Mama was your first client. They hate us because she looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me and although I married Billy Cato who was an 8-rock like you, like them, I passed the skin onto my daughter. A lot of those Sands seem to marry the Seawrights but they are careful to make sure that their children marry into other 8-rock families. We were the first visible glitch, but there was an invisible one too. In Billy's family. Because his mother, Fawn, was born a Blackhorse and married his grandmother's uncle, August Cato. Or, to put it another way, Billy's mother married her own great uncle. Or another way: my husband's father, August Cato, is also his grandmother's (Bitty Cato Blackhorse's) uncle and therefore Billy's great granduncle as well. (Bitty Cato's father, Sterl Cato, married a woman named Honesty Jones. It must have been she who insisted on naming her daughter Friendship, and was probably riled at hearing the child called Bitty for the rest of her life.) Since Bitty Cato married Peter Blackhorse, and since her daughter, Fawn Blackhorse, married Bitty's uncle, and since Peter Blackhorse is Bitty Cato's grandfather--

well, you can see the problem with blood rules. It's distant, I know, and August Cato was an old man when he married little Fawn Blackhorse. And maybe that's why she had just the one child, my husband Billy. Still the Blackhorse blood is there and that makes my daughter, Billie Delia a fifth? cousin to Soane and Dovey because Peter Blackhorse was brother to Thomas Blackhorse and Sally Blackhorse, and Thomas Blackhorse was Soane's and Dovey's father. Now Sally Blackhorse married Aaron Poole and had eleven children, two of whom Billie Delia is in love with, and there is something wrong with that but other than the blood rules I can't figure out what."

Pat wrote down her mother's name, drew a line under it, tipped it with an arrow and wrote:

"The women really tried, Mama. They really did. Kate's mother, Catherine Jury, you remember her, and Lolly Duffies, the midwife who delivered me (she's dead now), and Bobbie Morgan and Charity Flood. But none of them could drive. You must have believed that deep down they hated you, but not all of them, maybe none of them, because they begged the men to go get help. I heard them. Dovey Morgan was crying as she left to find somebody, going from house to house: to Harper Jury, Catherine's own husband, to Charity's husband, Ace

Flood, and to Sargeant Person's (how come that ignorant Negro doesn't know his name is Pierson?) All of the excuses were valid, reasonable. Even with their wives begging they came up with excuses because they looked down on you Mama, I know it, and despised Daddy for marrying a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering. The two midwives were in trouble (it was coming too soon, feet first and folded underneath) and all they wanted was to get one of the nuns at the Convent. Miss Fairy said one of them was a nurse. Catherine Jury went to Soane's to see if Deek was there. He wasn't, but Dovey was. It was Dovey who went to Seawright's, then Fishwood's. Went to every house in walking distance. The other midwives's lived way way out. So did Nathan DuPres (who would have hitched 'tk and galloped to Jesus to help). So did Steward, the Pund's, the Sands' and the rest. Finally they got Senior Pulliam to answer. But by the time he got his shoes tied it was too late. Miss Fairy ran from your bedside to Senior's house and hollered through his door--too frustrated to knock, too angry to step inside--and said 'You can take your shoes back off, Senior! Might as well get your preacher clothes ready so you'll be in time for the funeral!' Then she was gone from there.

"When Daddy got back everybody was worried sick about how long the bodies could last before, father or no father, husband or no husband, you both had to go in the ground. But Daddy came back the second day. No time for a decent wake. So you were his first job. And a wonderful job he did too. You were beautiful. With the baby in the crook of your arm. You would have been a proud of Daddy.

"He doesn't blame anybody except himself for being at mortuary graduation. We have quarrelled about it and he doesn't agree with me that those 8-rock men didn't want to go and bring a white into town; or else didn't want to drive out to a white's house begging for help; or else they just despised your pale skin so much they thought of reasons why they could not go. Daddy says more than one woman has died in childbirth and I say who? So the mother without one died and the baby whom you planned to name Edith if a girl, or Richard, after Daddy's oldest brother, if a boy, died too. Faustine. My baby sister. We would have grown up together, Patricia and Faustine. Too light, maybe, but together it would not have mattered to us. We'd be a team. I have no aunts or uncles, remember, because all of Daddy's sisters and brothers died of what they called walking pneumonia but what must have been the 1919 influenza epidemic. So I married Billy

Cato when I finished that school in Texas, partly because he was beautiful, partly because he made me laugh, and partly (mostly?) because he had the midnight skin of the Cato's and the Blackhorse's along with that Blackhorse feature of stick straight hair. Like Soane's and Dovey's hair, and like Easter and Scout had. But he died, Billy did, and I took my lightish but not white-ish baby and moved back in your pretty little house with the mortuary in back and have been drylong-so teaching the children who call me Mrs. Best using Daddy's last name as everybody else does, so short was the time I was Pat Cato. "

The words had long ago covered the back of the page, so she was using fresh sheets to continue:

"That must have been some ride from Haven to here. You, Mama, among those skinny blue black giants, neither they nor their wives staring at your long brown hair, your honey speckled eyes, but the babies unable not to. Did Daddy tell you Don't worry your head; it was going to be all right? Did they ever need you, was you to go into a store to get supplies or a can of milk while they parked around the corner? If so, that was the only thing your skin was good for. Otherwise it bothered them. Reminded them of why Haven existed, of why a new town had to take its place. The one-drop law the whites

made up was hard to live by if nobody could tell it was there. When you drove through a town, or when a sheriff's car was near, did Daddy tell you to get down, to lie on the floor of the car because it would have been no use telling a stranger that you were colored and worse to say you were his wife? Did Soane or Dovey, new brides too, talk woman-talk with you? You were pregnant and so were they (you were carrying me and that was Dovey's first miscarriage). So did you talk together about how you all felt? Make tea for hemorrhoids, give one another salt to lick or copper dirt to eat in secret? I craved baking soda when I carried Billie Delia. Did you when you carried me? Did the older women with children advise you, like Aaron's wife Sally with four children already? What about Alice Pulliam—her husband wasn't a reverend yet but he had already heard the call and decided to become one so they must have had some charity, some Godly feelings then when they were young. Did they mean you welcome right away or did they all wait for the open to be re-assembled and the following year re-baptize you in the river just so they could speak to you directly, look you in the eyes?

"What did Daddy say to you at Camp M. E. Zion Clinic? The one held for colored soldiers stationed at the base in Tennessee. How

could either of you tell what the other was saying? He talking Louisiana, you speaking Tennessee. The music so different, the sound coming from a different part of the body. It must have been like hearing lyrics set to scores by two different composers. But he must have said I love you and you understood that and it was true too, because I have seen the desperation in his eyes ever since--no matter what business venture he thinks up."

Across the hall through the bedroom door she could hear the sound of her father snoring. As always she wished him pleasant dreams--something to assuage the unhappiness of his days, days spent trying to please, to make up for. Except for marrying her mother, she couldn't think what rule he had broken that made him so eager for the approval of those who despised him. He had described to her once what heaven looked like when he got out of the army. He said he sat on his father's porch coughing so nobody would think he was crying. His father, Fulton Best, and his mother, Olive, were inside reading with great sorrow the applications he had sent out for the G.I. Bill funding. Roger was the only surviving child--all the others having died in the flu epidemic. His parents could not bear either the thought of his leaving again or of his staying in a town slipping into a

blank history. Erased forever and in every way except the heart. He was looking up and down the cracked concrete street tk when Ace Flood and Harper Jury walked up to him saying there was a plan. Deek and Steward Morgan had a plan. When he heard what it was the first thing he did was write to the hazel eyed girl with light brown hair to whom he had been writing all during the war. Good thing he didn't tell them about her. They would have persuaded him the way, later on, they persuaded Menus. Maybe he knew they would which is why he just sent for her. "Darling Delia, Come on! Right now. Here is the money order. I am going to have a lot of trouble keeping my heart quiet. Until you get here I will be a crazy man..." Their jaws must have dropped when she arrived but, other than Steward, nobody said anything directly. They didn't have to. Olive took to her bed. Fulton kept grunting and rubbing his knees. Only Steward had the gall to say out loud "He's bringing along the dung too running behind." Dovey shushed him. Soane too. But Fairy Doves cursed him, saying "God don't love ugly. Watch out He don't do you what you love too." But they were women and what they said easily over ruled by good brave men on their way to Paradise. They got there too and eventually had the satisfaction of seeing the dung buried. Most of it anyway. Some

of it instructed their grandchildren in a level of intelligence they would never acquire.

Pat sucked her teeth and pushed aside the Best file. She selected a student composition notebook and without label or introduction began to write.

"She won't listen to me. Not one word. She works in Demby at a clinic--cleaning up, I think, but she makes out like she's a nurses' aide because of the uniform she has to wear. I don't know how she lives. I mean she has a room, she says, in the house of a nice family. I don't believe it. Not all of it. One of those Poole boys, both of them probably, is visiting her. I know because the littlest one, Dina, told the class about her big brother showing her a house with Christmas lights all over the porch. Well that was some place other than Ruby. She is lying and I would rather be bit by the serpent himself than have a lying child. I didn't want to hit her so hard. I didn't know I had. I just meant to stop her lying mouth telling me she didn't do anything. I saw them. All three of them back behind the Oven and she was in the middle. Plus I am the one who washes sheets around here."

Pat stopped, put down her pencil and, covering her eyes with her hand, tried to separate what she saw from what she feared to see.

And what did the sheets have to do with it? Was there blood when there should not have been or no blood where there should have been? It was more than a year ago and she thought everything was seared in her memory. It took place in October of 1973. Billie Delia ran off and stayed at the Convent for two weeks and one day. She came back during the morning session while Pat was teaching the under twelves and stayed long enough to say she wasn't going to. They'd had ugly words, but both were afraid to get near the other lest the quarrel get physical as it had before. She left with one of those Poole boys and didn't come back till early this year to describe her job and write down her address. Since then Pat had seen her twice: once in March and then at Arnette's wedding where she was a bridesmaid and a maid of honor both since Arnette would not have anybody else, and no other girl wanted the honor anyway if it meant walking down the aisle with Billie Delia. Or so Pat thought. She had gone to the wedding, not the reception but she hadn't missed a thing since she had a perfect view of the goings on at the Oven with those women from the Convent. She saw them. She saw those Poole boys. And she saw Billie Delia sit down and talk to one of the women like they were old friends. She saw Reverend Pulliam and Deek Morgan

argue with the women and when they drove off she saw Billie Delia throw her bouquet in the trash can before she strolled off, Apollo and Brood Poole in tow.

Billie Delia drove off the next day in her very own car, and never said a word to her mother about the wedding, the reception, the women or anything. Now she tried to remember how that iron got into her hand, what had been said that had her running up the stairs with an iron clutched in her fingers to slam against her daughter's head. She who was the gentlest of souls, missed killing, perhaps, her own daughter by inches. She who loved children and protected them not only from each other but from too stern parents, lunged after her own daughter in a blood hot rage. She who had been trained to reasoning and soft manners and discretion and dignity, falling down the stairs and bruising herself so badly she had to cancel two days of class. Educated and self-trained to make sure that everybody knew that the daughter of the woman with sunlight skin and only one name was of great worth and inestimable value. All she could think of now was that ever since Billie Delia was a baby, Pat thought of her as a liability somehow. Vulnerable to the possibility of not being quite as much of a lady as her mother would like. Was it that business of

pulling down her panties in the street? Billie Delia was only three. Pat knew that had her daughter been an 8-rock they would not have held it against her the way they had. But the question for her now in the silence of the night was whether or not she had defended Billie Delia or sacrificed her? And was she sacrificing her still? The iron in her hand as she ran up the stairs was to smash the young girl that lived in the minds of the 8-rocks; not the girl her daughter was.

Pat licked her bottom lip, tasted salt and discovered she had been crying for some time now.

of it instructed their grandchildren in a level of intelligence they would never acquire.

Pat sucked her teeth and pushed aside the Best file. She selected a student composition notebook and without label or introduction began to write.

"She won't listen to me. Not one word. She works in Demby at a clinic--cleaning up, I think, but she makes out like she's a nurses' aide because of the uniform she has to wear. I don't know how she lives. I mean she has a room, she says, in the house of a nice family. I don't believe it. Not all of it. One of those Poole boys, both of them probably, is visiting her. I know because the littlest one, Dina, told the class about her big brother showing her a house with Christmas lights all over the porch. Well that was some place other than Ruby. She is lying and I would rather be bit by the serpent himself than have a lying child. I didn't want to hit her so hard. I didn't know I had. I just meant to stop her lying mouth telling me she didn't do anything. I saw them. All three of them back behind the Oven and she was in the middle. Plus I am the one who washes sheets around here."

Pat stopped, put down her pencil and, covering her eyes with her hand, tried to separate what she saw from what she feared to see.

And what did the sheets have to do with it? Was there blood when there should not have been or no blood where there should have been? It was more than a year ago and she thought everything was seared in her memory. It took place in October of 1973. Billie Delia ran off and stayed at the Convent for two weeks and one day. She came back during the morning session while Pat was teaching the under twelves and stayed long enough to say she wasn't going to. They'd had ugly words, but both were afraid to get near the other lest the quarrel get physical as it had before. She left with one of those Poole boys and didn't come back till early this year to describe her job and write down her address. Since then Pat had seen her twice: once in March and then at Arnette's wedding where she was a bridesmaid and a maid of honor both since Arnette would not have anybody else, and no other girl wanted the honor anyway if it meant walking down the aisle with Billie Delia. Or so Pat thought. She had gone to the wedding, not the reception but she hadn't missed a thing since she had a perfect view of the goings on at the Upen with those women from the Convent. She saw David. She saw those Poole boys. And she saw Billie Delia sit down and talk to one of the women like they were old friends. She saw Reverend Pullman and Dick Morgan

argue with the women and when they drove off she saw Billie Delia throw her bouquet in the trash can before she strolled off, Apollo and Brood Poole in tow.

Billie Delia drove off the next day in her very own car, and never said a word to her mother about the wedding, the reception, the women or anything. Now she tried to remember how that iron got into her hand, what had been said that had her running up the stairs with an iron clutched in her fingers to slam against her daughter's head. She who was the gentlest of souls, missed killing, perhaps, her own daughter by inches. She who loved children and protected them not only from each other but from too stern parents, lunged after her own daughter in a blood hot rage. She who had been trained to reasoning and soft manners and discretion and dignity, falling down the stairs and bruising herself so badly she had to cancel two days of class. Educated and self-trained to make sure that everybody knew that the daughter of the woman with so light skin and only one name was of great worth and inestimable value. All she could think of now was that ever since Billie Delia was a baby, Pat thought of her as a liability somehow. Vulnerable to the possibility of not being quite as much of a lady as her mother would like. Was it that business of

Arnette and K.D., married last July, were expecting a child. Or so said Lone DuPres who ought to know. Lone was one of the stolen babies. Fairy duPres saw her sitting outside the door of a sod house in a little dirty shift. Whimpering. They were on their way to what would become Haven and this was one of the many painful sights they came across. Fairy and Missy Rivers went to investigate. Inside was the dead mother and not a piece of bread in sight. Missy sighed and shook her head; Fairy said "God damn it, 'scuse me. Lord." and picked the baby up. When they told the others what they'd found, seven men silently got up and reached for their shovels: Drum Blackhorse, Rector Morgan, Thomas and Peter Blackhorse, Able Flood, Brood Poole, Sr. and Nathan DuPres. While they dug, Fairy fed the baby. Praise Compton tore her underskirt to wrap around it. Fulton Best fashioned a sturdy cross. Zachariah, held up by two of his sons, delivered a burial prayer. His daughters, Loving, Ella and Selanie gathered flowers for the grave. Bitty Cato and fairy argued over the name, and Fairy won. She named the baby Lone because that's how they found her and taught her everything she knew about midwifery. And Lone she still was for she never married and when Faiory died she slipped right in and took care of the birthing for everybody except

no civil battle. They consolidated the 8-rock blood and, haughty as ever, moved further west. The New Fathers: Deacon Morgan, Steward Morgan, William Cato, Ace Flood, Aaron Poole, Senior Pulliam, Nathan DuPres, Moss DuPres, Arnold Fleetwood, Ossie Beauchamp, Harper Jury, Sargeant Person, John Seawright, Edwards Sands and her father, Roger Best, who was the first to violate the blood rule. The one nobody admitted existed. The one established when the Louisiana pilgrims noticed and remembered that the Disallowing came from fair-skinned colored men. Blue-eyed, gray-eyed yellowmen in good suits. They were kind, though, as the story went. Gave them food and blankets; took up a collection for them, but were unmoving in their refusal to let the 8-rocks stay longer than a night's rest. The story went that Zechariah Morgan and Drum Blackhorse forbade the women to eat the food. That August Cato left the blankets in the tent with the offering of three dollars and nine cents neatly stacked on top. But Soane said her grandmother, Celeste Blackhorse, sneaked back and got the food secretly passing it to her sister Sally Blackhorse, to Bitty Cato, and Praise Compton to distribute to the children.

So the rule was set and lived a solid forever life because it was never spoken, except for the hint in words Zechariah forged for the

Oven. More than a rule. A curse: "Beware the furrow of His Brow" in which the You (understood) nominative case was not a command to the believers, the pilgrims looking for Paradise, but a threat to those who had stood in the way. It must have taken him months to think up those words--just so--to have multiple meanings; to appear stern urging obedience to God, but neutral, not identifying the subject of the sentence nor specifying what the Furrow might cause to happen. So the teen-agers Misner organized who wanted to change it to "We Are the Furrow of His Brow" were more insightful than they knew. Look what they did to Menus, forcing him to give back or return the woman he brought home to marry. The pretty sandy-haired girl from Virginia. Menus hadn't been sober since. And though they attributed his weekend drunks to his Vietnam memories, and although they laughed with him as he cut their hair, Pat knew love in its desperate state when she saw it. She believed she had seen it in her father's eyes, poorly veiled by his business ventures.

Before she put away the K.D. pages Pat scribbled a vertical note up the margin: "Somebody beat up Arnette. The Convent women as folks say? Or, quiet as its kept, K.D.?" Then she picked up the file for Best, Roger. On the back of the page labeled:

Roger Best m. Delia

she wrote: "Daddy, they don't hate us because Mama was your first client. They hate us because she looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me and although I married Billy Cato who was an 8-rock like you, like them, I passed the skin onto my daughter. A lot of those Sands seem to marry the Seawrights but they are careful to make sure that their children marry into other 8-rock families. We were the first visible glitch, but there was an invisible one too. In Billy's family. Because his mother, Fawn, was born a Blackhorse and married his grandmother's uncle, August Cato. Or, to put it another way, Billy's mother married her own great uncle. Or another way: my husband's father, August Cato, is also his grandmother's (Bitty Cato Blackhorse's) uncle and therefore Billy's great granduncle as well. (Bitty Cato's father, Sterl Cato, married a woman named Honesty Jones. It must have been she who insisted on naming her daughter Friendship, and was probably riled at hearing the child called Bitty for the rest of her life.) Since Bitty Cato married Peter Blackhorse, and since her daughter, Fawn Blackhorse, married Bitty's uncle, and since Peter Blackhorse is Billy Cato's grandfather--

well, you can see the problem with blood rules. It's distant, I know, and August Cato was an old man when he married little Fawn Blackhorse. And maybe that's why she had just the one child, my husband Billy. Still the Blackhorse blood is there and that makes my daughter, Billie Delia a fifth? cousin to Soane and Dovey because Peter Blackhorse was brother to Thomas Blackhorse and Sally Blackhorse, and Thomas Blackhorse was Soane's and Dovey's father. Now Sally Blackhorse married Aaron Poole and had eleven children, two of whom Billie Delia is in love with, and there is something wrong with that but other than the blood rules I can't figure out what."

Pat wrote down her mother's name, drew a line under in, tipped it with an arrow and wrote:

"The women really tried, Mama. They really did. Kate's mother, Catherine Jury, you remember her, and Fairy DuPres, the midwife who delivered me (she's dead now), and Dovey Morgan and Charity Flood. But none of them could drive. You must have believed that deep down they hated you, but not all of them, maybe none of them, because they begged the men to go get help. I heard them. Dovey Morgan was crying as she left to find somebody, going from house to house: to Harper Jury, Catherine's own husband, to Charity's husband, Ace

Flood, and to Sargeant Person's (how come that ignorant Negro doesn't know his name is Pierson?) All of the excuses were valid, reasonable. Even with their wives begging they came up with excuses because they looked down on you Mama, I know it, and despised Daddy for marrying a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering. The two midwives were in trouble (it was coming too soon, feet first and folded underneath) and all they wanted was to get one of the nuns at the Convent. Miss Fairy said one of them was a nurse. Catherine Jury went to Soane's to see if Deek was there. He wasn't, but Dovey was. It was Dovey who went to Seawright's, then Fleetwood's. Went to every house in walking distance. The Booker DuPres's lived way way out. So did Nathan DuPres (who would have hitched tk and galloped to Jesus to help). So did Steward, the Poole's, the Sands' and the rest. Finally they got Senior Pulliam to agree. But by the time he got his shoes tied it was too late. Miss Fairy rushed from your bedside to Senior's house and hollered through his door--too frustrated to knock, too angry to step inside--and said 'You can take your shoes back off, Senior! Might as well get your preacher clothes ready so you'll be in time for the funeral!' Then she was gone from there.

"When Daddy got back everybody was worried sick about how long the bodies could last before, father or no father, husband or no husband, you both had to go in the ground. But Daddy came back the second day. No time for a decent wake. So you were his first job. And a wonderful job he did too. You were beautiful. With the baby in the crook of your arm. You would have been so proud of Daddy.

"He doesn't blame anybody except himself for being at mortuary graduation. We have quarrelled about it and he doesn't agree with me that those 8-rock men didn't want to go and bring a white into town; or else didn't want to drive out to a white's house begging for help; or else they just despised your pale skin so much they thought of reasons why they could not go. Daddy says more than one woman has died in childbirth and I say who? So the mother without one died and the baby whom you planned to name Faustine if a girl, or Richard, after Daddy's oldest brother, if a boy, died too. Faustine. My baby sister. We would have grown up together. Patricia and Faustine. Too light, maybe, but together it would not have mattered to us. We'd be a team. I have no aunts or uncles, remember, because all of Daddy's sisters and brothers died of what they called walking pneumonia but what must have been the 1919 influenza epidemic. So I married Billy